

## Triangular spaces and social skins in organisations

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# Triangular spaces and social skins in Organisations<sup>1</sup>

Erhard Tietel

## ***Introduction***

This article will present two concepts inspired by psychoanalysis which are significant for the perception of socio-emotional processes in organisations and therefore to organisational consultation. A case study of a team supervision in which the “institutional triangulation” (Pühl 2002) failed will be used as a basis for their exploration. These concepts include two components: i) the image of a social skin which holds together and envelops the organisation as a whole as well as its parts; ii) the idea of triangular spaces in organisations that support co-operation and interactions. In the practice of supervision and consultancy one is often confronted with a process of splitting and setting up borders in and between groups (subcultures) and the loss of openness and permeability of the departments’ and teams’ social skins which become sealed and shielded against each other. This article is based on the assumption that the desire for a holding social skin is compatible with spaces present in organisational negotiation that have a triangular structure, therefore giving the desire for a social skin the potential for development rather than regressive closure.

I would first like to add a clarifying preliminary remark about concepts in this text: while psychoanalytical organisational research usually focuses on the relationship between the individual and the organisation, i.e. the significance of organisational processes for the individual psyche, I focus on a level of the organisation which is above the individual but below the organisation as a whole and assume that socio-emotional dynamics in organisations consist of interactions in and between organisational subcultures (which is more specific than the concept of groups). The following are considered as belonging to organisational subcultures: functional subcultures (various business sectors, departments, teams, project groups etc.), hierarchical subcultures (the cultures of the upper management levels, of the heads of departments, of the group leaders etc.), professional subcultures (e.g. the cultures of doctors, nurses, administrators within hospitals; the cultures of businessmen, the cultures of technicians, engineers and the culture of the master craftsmen within industry), countercultures (e.g. staff and workers councils, or the growing number of ‘losers’ in the process of modernisation who show active or passive resistance to these changes) and finally, informal cultures such as cliques. My thoughts on triangular spaces and social skins in organisations are based on these middle levels of processes in and between subcultures within organisations.

## ***A Vignette as introduction to the subject matter***

Towards the end of the fourth supervision meeting with a team of social workers working in a stationary youth home, the atmosphere relaxed noticeably. The beginning of the supervision was marked by the question of whether the team required supervision and whether this was really their wish. It also became clear that the contents and goals of the supervision needed clarification. That there were tensions between the team and the management level was the

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only clear point. With the help of supervision the team felt challenged to work on its professionalism, its image, its acceptance and its embeddedness in the organisation. In the diagnostic phase encompassing three meetings, the team and I compiled present and future foreseeable external demands awaiting them (coming from clients and their relatives, from management, from the organisation as a whole and from various boards and related institutions). The question arose of what their goals were or could be on the basis of the demands of their relevant counterparts. Finally, we discussed a question related to human resources: how the team could prepare and qualify itself for mastering and structuring these duties and goals.

The atmosphere was tense but as mentioned previously, an intervention - or more precisely an interpretation on my part at the end of the fourth meeting - led to a relaxation of the atmosphere. The team suddenly felt understood, their faces cheered up and we laughed a lot. I was relieved, felt my tension dissipate and be replaced by the pleasing feeling that as the supervisor I had correctly recognised the situation and consequently that the team accepted and acknowledged me. In the meantime, the supervision had been authorised officially by the organisation. Nevertheless, the question as to the future goals and contents of the supervision remained open. My attention fell on the 'list of goals' which we had compiled together and which included the goal 'authentic exchange of ideas and critique with the management'. Encouraged by the relaxed atmosphere, I spontaneously and without guard said that within this protected space, I could imagine inviting their superior to a supervision meeting in order to discuss certain points of dissatisfaction in and with the organisation, which they had already collected and analysed.

As I finished the sentence, I felt the atmosphere change abruptly at the mention of the name of their boss and the word 'invitation' and the face of at least one member turned to stone. The change in the atmosphere was so abrupt that I felt startled. I asked myself what I could possibly have done wrong. From what they said I understood that they had initially thought I had been given the secret duty of spying on them and to 'open them' for their superiors. The supervisor was perceived as a secret agent of management. I suddenly understood the tension of the previous meetings. Exactly when this distrust had dissipated, leaving room for the feeling that, whilst the management did not understand them, at least the supervisor did, I made a proposition that instantly brought back the underlying fantasy that had accompanied and permeated the process and their affects for a long time. Furthermore, I now had provided a basis in reality for this fantasy. Suddenly, I no longer was their supervisor and trustee, but was situated in a position somewhere between agent and traitor. This feeling could not be completely eliminated despite (or perhaps because of) my assertions of my innocence.

### ***Supervision between exposure and tolerance of ambivalence- the paranoid-schizoid and depressive mode of generating experience***

'No "good breast" only the "bad, poisonous breast" which they had to beware of' - this was my thought as I left the team. On my way back home I remembered a passage from a book by Thomas Ogden in which he discusses Melanie Klein's conception of the switching from good to bad breast in the following manner: in the paranoid-schizoid mode of generating experience,

each time a good object is disappointing, it is no longer experienced as a good object-nor even as a disappointing good object-but as the discovery of a bad object in what had been masquerading as a good one. Instead of the experience of ambivalence, there is the experience of unmasking the truth. (Ogden 1992, 1 19).

What I had experienced could not be formulated more precisely.

Here I want to mention a word about the paranoid-schizoid mode of generating experience<sup>2</sup> which is not only known in the clinical sector but can also be observed in the sphere of the family, in religious and political confrontations and in the permanent warfare within micro-political arenas of organisations. According to Heltzel (1998, S. 14), the world of the paranoid-schizoid mode is characterised by ‘splitting and accusations, fear of persecution, fantasies of destruction, deep injuries and impulses for revenge’. In the paranoid-schizoid mode persons, groups, subsystems and cultures of organisations, even entire organisations deposit those impulses and aspirations considered as bad into others, thereby finding a way of emptying and unloading themselves. Individually and collectively, relationships are therefore being split into good and bad, friend and enemy, the realm of the good and the realm of the bad. This way one is always faced with only one type of relationship to others at a time (see Schmidt-Löw-Beer 1995).

The relationship of the aforementioned team to their superior was so strongly determined by tendencies of walling themselves off that there was no space left for reflection. The mere proposal of entering a ‘clarifying dialogue’ (as the members of the team had formulated themselves on the manifest level) could only be experienced on the latent level as betrayal and the revelation of my true colours (as the agent of their enemy boss). In anticipation of a point I will describe below - it can be said that the team could not imagine a ‘triangular space’ between themselves, their superior and their supervisor. They could only imagine, and most of all experience, the dyadic and dichotomous: ‘us’ and ‘he’ and raise the question: ‘which side are you on? Tell us!’

Such situations are well known in supervision, and literature on supervision describes this in detail. Thea Bauridl (1994) and Harald Pühl (2002) have worked for years on the problems of unconscious offers of alliances to the supervisor and the related questions of ‘institutional triangulation’. According to Pühl one often comes across the phenomenon that the team wants to exclude the superiors from the supervision process. Furthermore, even supervisors do not always keep the institutional triangle in mind. In order for supervisors to work successfully they have to enter a triangular relationship meaning that their client includes the team itself as well as its institution as represented by management i.e., those responsible.

The capability of balancing within oneself opposing and diverging impulses is a prerequisite for upholding good relationships with diverging or even rivalrous groups. Bauridl and Pühl describe this as the inner mobility and flexibility which enables an actor to ‘keep the angle’ in contact with others. Bauridl (1994, p. 235f.) considers this to be ‘the attempt of becoming conscious of having a specific and changing relationship with the one *and* with the other group respectively. These two relationships do not negate each other’. An inner freedom of movement is required in order to keep the angle in the triangle, and in order to go against the established norms in the triad. According to Pühl to keep the angle in organisational triadic relationships is the capacity of resisting the formations of coalition through the seductions and coercions of the others and furthermore of overcoming one’s own fear of movement, and even to uphold one’s freedom and pleasure of mobility in triadic settings.

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<sup>2</sup>According to Ogden a mode of generating experience is ‘a process through which perception is attributed meaning in a particular way’ (Ogden 1992, p. 11). ‘Each of these modes of generating experience is characterised by its own form of symbolisation, method of defence, quality of object-relatedness and a degree of subjectivity’ (Ibid. p. 10).

In psychoanalysis these aspects refer to the 'depressive mode'. The central point here is that people in the depressive mode of generating experience are capable of bearing ambivalence (being herewith in a lesser need of projecting their undigested impulses onto others). Schmidt-Löw-Beer gives the following summary of the depressive mode:

We get to know ourselves and others as multifaceted beings which can be viewed from different perspectives. These perspectives are no longer seen as given but as being produced subjectively. One is conscious of the relativity of their validity, their one-sidedness and the constant possibility of seeing things differently. In the depressive position one's life history is not just merely produced but it is narrated, rewritten and expanded. There is a space between us and the other which allows us to understand each other and to refer to one another in the context of a mutual history. This enables an understanding of guilt, reparation, and reconciliation. (Schmidt-Löw-Beer 1995, p. IIIf.)

This description of the depressive mode of generating experience shows it as a highly differentiated and developed mode. In other words, it represents the capacity for triangulation - the meaning and importance of which for the social context of organisations will be described below.

### ***The social skin of teams***

Before I focus on the problem of triangulation I would like to discuss a further aspect of the case study. Before I was catapulted to the other side of the rift (caused by the processes of splitting) of the organisation as a consequence of my proposition of inviting the superior to the supervision, I had had the feeling of having been accepted by and affiliated to the team. I had been integrated in something that I would like to call the 'social skin' of the team. What does this mean? Teams are a subsystem and subculture of an organisation in its entirety: they are established on principles of division of labour and embedded into the network of other cooperating subsystems and subcultures in the organisation. Within this though, they have their peculiarities and a system of self-referral that are not to be underestimated. A team is situated in a system of constant referral to itself, to its inner structure and dynamics, as well as to its interests and to its structural and cultural position within the organisation. Teams know how to interpret and fulfil the goals and duties assigned to them in such a way that are compatible with their own values and systems of meaning. As Senghaas-Knoboch (1996) writes, they create their own specific work culture. Their peculiarities and cultural self-referral is stabilised by sub-cultural basic assumptions (Schein 1992) that are taken for granted, and no longer questioned by the team-members after they have undergone the process of socialisation in the subculture. This welds the team together on a deep level. All these aspects taken together show how teams are sealed and cut off<sup>3</sup> from other subcultures of the organisation whether they be other teams, other functions, other professions or the hierarchical culture of different management levels. One could also say that the team possesses a boundary around itself which, seen psychodynamically, is experienced as a social skin. One of the archaic functions of this skin is to give the team members the feeling of belonging and of being held, finally a feeling of being 'one'. I will now unfold this idea.

### ***The concept of the social skin***

I first developed my thoughts and ideas on organisations and their sub-parts as being held together by a social skin (or more precisely as having the possibility of being experienced as

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the tendencies for "boundless organisations" subcultural boundaries do not disappear. As Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1993) show that the organisational boundaries only change their appearance and have to constantly be managed by all members and groups within the organisation. As Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1993, p.31) name the following boundaries: the boundary of authority and responsibility, the boundary of the tasks, the boundary of politics and interests and finally the boundary of identity.

such) in my postdoctoral thesis on 'Triangular Cultures in Organisations'. I based this on Thomas Ogden's (1992) elaboration of the modes of generating experience outlined above (paranoid-schizoid and depressive mode) and included the 'autistic-contiguous' mode. According to Klüwer (1997, p.154) this third mode of generating experience in earliest childhood describes a 'dimension of human experience which has been insufficiently understood' and which like the other two modes 'represents an integral part of normal development'. In this third mode the experience of skin plays a central role. This led me to the formulation of a social skin reaching beyond the direct bodily experience of the skin of the individual. I now present a short outline of the developmental background of the autistic-contiguous mode in order to facilitate the understanding of its 'transference' to the social field.

Ogden (1992, p.4) describes the autistic-contiguous mode as a 'sensory-dominated, pre-symbolic area of experience in which the most primitive form of meaning is generated on the basis of the organization of sensory impressions, particularly at the skin surface.' According to Ogden, the early experiences of sensory contiguity define a surface on which experience is created and organised. The experience of rhythm also plays a central role in the development of the earliest organisation of the psyche: 'Both rhythmicity and experiences of surface contiguity are fundamental to a person's earliest relations with objects: the nursing experience and the experience of being held, rocked, spoken to and sung to in his mother's arms'. (ibid., p. 32). That which is characteristic in the autistic-contiguous world is the unity of experience: 'Contiguity of surfaces (e.g., "molded" skin surfaces, harmonic sounds, rhythmic rocking or sucking, symmetrical shapes) generate the experience of a sensory surface rather than the feeling of two surfaces coming together either in mutually differentiating opposition or in merger' (ibid., p. 34). Here Klüwer (1997, p.155) makes the connection to the experience of space: the 'created surface becomes an envelope ...which undergoes the further development into a space-enclosing surface.' In a similar vein Krejci (1999b, p. 102f.) suggests that the internalisation of the experience of the skin creates the first fantasies of inner and external spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Ogden draws important aspects of the autistic-contiguous experience from Esther Bick's (1968) research on the meaning of the experience of the skin in early childhood, especially the findings on the formation of a psychic skin in the context of the physical experiences of the skin. Staehle gives the following summary: 'The baby's sensory experiences of the skin when being touched and held, lead to its feeling of psychic coherence' (1997, p. 350). In this mode of experience the individual parts of the personality are not yet bound together through adhering forces, so it is the skin which takes on the function of 'passively holding the personality together'. The point I find important here is the notion of a passive holding together: the experience of something which, without entering the focus of perception, can offer a context in which one feels contained and held. If this experience does not occur a fear emerges, which can be compared to the fear of annihilation and persecution in the paranoid-schizoid position: 'terror over the prospect that the boundedness of one's sensory surface might be dissolved, with a resultant feeling of falling, leaking, dropping, into an endless and shapeless space' (Ogden 1992, S. 4). Bick (1968) here marks the important difference between the 'unintegrated' as a feeling of passive helplessness (according to Ogden this is part of the autistic-contiguous experience) and the 'disintegrated' caused by processes of splitting as a defence mechanism at the service of further development (the version of the paranoid-schizoid mode). Perhaps the fear of falling out of the social skins of organisations, as experienced by many people threatened by unemployment, reactivates these early fears.

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<sup>4</sup> The relevance of the body surface for the development of the ego can already be found in Freud (1923, p.26).

Possibly this does not only occur when threatened by falling out of the organisation but also when drastic changes take place in one's own workplace and familiar work environment - a phenomenon which has become characteristic in the everyday life of many organisations. These changes can evoke fears stemming from the autistic-contiguous experience.

Which types of defence mechanisms are attributed to the specific fears of the autistic-contiguous mode? In order to answer this question Ogden once again refers to Bick (1968) who describes a type of defence mechanism as the 'second skin formation'. Bick summarises here the effort of defending oneself by trying to recall a feeling of continuity and integrity of one's surface for example, in the case that the preserving object is particularly insecurely anchored, in order to hold itself together the baby develops omnipotent fantasies, through which the need for a passively experienced object is avoided (see Hinshelwood 1991). Bick describes this in the following way:

Disturbance in the primal skin function can lead to a development of a "second-skin" formation through which dependence on the object is replaced by pseudo-independence, by the inappropriate use of certain mental functions, or perhaps innate talents, for the purpose of creating a substitute for this skin container function. (Bick 1968, p.115)

What conclusions can be drawn from the autistic-contiguous mode of generating experience for social processes in organisations? It is important to remember that the autistic-contiguous mode does not only refer to an early developmental phase. In their interplay the paranoid-schizoid, the depressive and the autistic-contiguous mode designate the 'synchronous mental structures' preliminary to every experience. These three modes are potentially always present and form the dialectic of emotional experience. This means that the autistic-contiguous mode of generating experience is involved in every socio-emotional experience of the life of the adult.

In my opinion, when applied to social processes people have the tendency to stretch out their containing psychic skin to include relevant groups: the social skin of the family, but also of their work-groups, teams, professional subculture, organisations. Paul Federn's (1978, p. 232) formulation on narcissistically invested 'groups-ego-boundaries' which gives people a 'strong and desired hold' anticipates the formulation of this phenomenon. In the presence of a social skin enveloping the specific organisational unity one can gain the experience of a communal surface with one's team or organisation, a place in which one 'feels, thinks and lives' (Ogden 1992, S.54), a place which on a basic level is characterised by feeling of 'unquestionably belonging there'. A place in which one can have an effect, one can enact, co-operate and argue, which one loves and hates, because it creates a passive holding-together through its adhesive force of 'belongingness' (in which even the team's scapegoat has a place); a place whose social skin is often taut to the point of tearing but usually is strong enough. A place in which events directly 'touch' us and which in the social field offers something that Winnicott tried to grasp and calls the 'holding function' of the holding environment (first represented through the holding function of the mother). Kets de Vries (2001) stresses the holding function of an organisation for its members, and in reference to Bowlby's (1973) analysis of human attachment, underlines that, besides giving their members a feeling for the meaning of their work, organisations have to give them an elementary feeling of attachment and affiliation. This is a feeling that is dwindling on many levels in the interplay of globalisation and individualisation.

The thoughts developed here support the thesis that threats to the social-skin-function of organisations evokes panic and fear, fantasies of fundamental annihilation and disintegration, the feeling of falling apart not only through the loss of all social hold but also of one's own

boundaries and coherence. Kets de Vries (2001, p. 103) speaks of the breaking of the 'psychological contract' between employees and the organisation. This contract consists of a strong emotional bond that employees have for their organisation, a deeply rooted feeling of affiliation and trust in the holding function of the organisation, a containing function for the fears present in the organisation.<sup>5</sup> A rising tendency of excessive and boundless self-exploitation can be found in organisations. This is brought about by managerial instruments such as 'agreement on objectives' and self-commitment (Schmidt 2000, p. 34). The workers councils discuss the problematic nature of these tendencies under the catchphrase 'working without end'. In reference to Bick's development of the second skin this tendency can be interpreted as a collective psycho-social defence strategy and a mutual staging of pseudo independence.

### ***Back to the vignette: the paranoid-schizoid sealing off of the social skin***

Already in the first session of supervision I noticed how important it was for this team to have their own place secluded in space and content from the central organisation and withdrawn from its regular control: 'thank god we are not in the central area'. Whether they were talking of the building in which they worked (our house), or about clients (our residents), or the standards for professional work (whatever the experts say – be they doctors, psychologists, lawyers – we have our style). A team which considers itself relatively independent, which would prefer to be self-employed but does not consider making a real step into independence from the 'mother' organisation (and herewith into the dependence of sinking social security contributions). A tight-knit community with a social skin that internally held the members together and externally protected them (as it appeared to me) but which had little permeability in its connection to the entire organisation. It was therefore not surprising that the problem concerning their active and creative connection to relevant actors and institutions in their social environment (inside and outside the organisation) met with little resonance. Our analysis of the institution had produced a picture of themselves that they could accept: a fortress within the organisation. This was an almost hidden, spatially separated fortress surrounded with strong walls opposing the environment (of the organisation) experienced as an enemy.

During a moment in the supervision (in the aforementioned session of the supervision) in which they felt comfortable in their skin they carefully, hesitantly, testingly allowed me inside these walls. The intervention leading to relief and relaxation consisted of nothing more than the fact that I communicated my impression that they were actually satisfied with their working habits and the way in which they organised the house together. This is why it would not have surprised me if the ideas for change which they developed in that session were directed more towards the other actors of their organisational environment than themselves. I told them that I now knew what they thought others expected of them with respect to change, but hardly had any idea about what they wanted to change, the reason for this being that they had the feeling they worked well.

The team members reacted to this with astonishment. They had expected me to give them a resume, resulting from our analysis of the institution, of those aspects of their image and professionalism needing change. They looked at each other, laughed and the team leader said: 'yes, that's true. Somehow you are right'. After this, for the first time in a long time they

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<sup>5</sup> In this text I stress the early and archaic form of the social skin of an organisation (maybe one could say: a maternal aspect of the organisation). From the psychoanalytic perspective the structure, rules and norms of an organisation also have the function of a social skin. In reference to Lacan this would be the symbolic dimension of the social skin whereas I describe the imaginary dimension.



could show in public (at least in the presence of the supervisor) that they thought they were good employees. A team member who had already worked long-term in the organisation said: 'you see, this is why I asked our superior why we actually need a supervisor'. Towards the end of this supervision session all team members experienced the situation as more 'real' and that it felt 'good'. They no longer needed to pretend that they wanted to change a lot of things and I no longer had to pretend that I was helping them create a new image for which they showed no interest. My intervention momentarily lifted the pressure for change that the organisation, especially the heads of department had threateningly burdened them with.

The session was nearing its end and I did not want to leave without at least having mentioned the problem of future goals and contents for the supervision. My intention in asking this question was to give the impulse for goal-definition which could now be based less on the will of the heads of department and more on their own ideas of the use of supervision (Tietel 2000) and how they could integrate it in the work with their clients. But, as already described, this openness between myself and the team was of short duration: my spontaneous suggestion of stepping into a process of clarification with their superior, immediately awakened the organisational splitting tendencies and furthermore, threatened the team's tendencies of hermetic closure against the organisation. In my opinion what the team feared was less the confrontation with the superiors, which they experienced as hostile and persecuting (they anyway had to deal with them every day), than the idea of an opening or breaking open of their social skin which they had sealed from the inside. This would mean that they would have to face the fantasised (and as I will discuss later, very real) attacks of their supervisors without any protection. Halton (1994, p. 15) draws the attention to a phenomenon which is important in this context: persons and groups in organisations unconsciously avoid real and direct meetings and contacts in order to keep up the self-idealisations based mostly on projections. Expressed in the terms of the socio-emotional mode of experience, the splitting tendencies of the paranoid-schizoid mode and of the social skin in its association with the autistic-contiguous mode combine, stabilise each other and (as one can often witness in organisations) form a network of defence against future-oriented, goal and task-related clarifying processes which cannot be handled without the challenges of the depressive mode i.e. (as I will show) the triangular processes of recognition.

I will mention here that complementary phenomena were occurring on the side of the superiors. Already, during the first phone call with the superior of the team, I experienced the devaluating way in which he spoke of the team to a stranger as out of place. This repeated itself in the diagnostic preparatory talks I had arranged in order to find out more about the views of the superiors about the organisational place, functions and tasks of this team, the goals they associated with the supervision as well as tendencies in the development of the organisation which I believed to be relevant for the supervision. In this meeting I sat opposite two superiors: the direct superior and the head of department. I was rather shocked about the unveiled remarks - clearly below the belt - which they made about individuals in the team. Even their answers referring to the team's tasks as well as information about trends of the social sector concerning them and the development tendencies in the organisation were given under the opinion that these were all things which this team did not want to take into consideration. The rejection and even hostility toward the team was accompanied by a noticeable self-righteousness of these bosses who seemed as satisfied with themselves as the team seemed to be of itself. Both sides had subcultures stabilised by rejection and devaluation whose social skin was hermetically sealed off toward each other.

The fortress of the rulers was comparable to the fortress of defiance of the unfaithful. The supervisor stood in front of the gate as the vagrant knight: a modern Don Quixote. I had the

feeling that I could only enter if I agreed with their respective viewpoints without questioning them. This repeated itself in the closing talk I had with the superiors after the 15 supervision sessions. In my career as supervisor I had rarely been faced as extremely with the feeling that my perception of the team and its members diverged so much from the way their superiors perceived them and that these views could not be united in any way. With almost every comment I saw myself faced with the choice of either going along with the superiors' lamentations and tuning in to their perceptions, or by trying to relativise a couple of points, automatically becoming the team's spokesman. During this meeting with the superiors I did not feel good in my skin as – contrary to a couple of meetings with the team. It was almost impossible for me to represent an independent professional third position.

We need to unfold the notion of organisational triangulation in order to give an idea of the meaning of introducing the supervision as a potential triangular and triangulating intervention in an organisation and hereby contributing to a heightened co-operative and reflecting potential within the organisation. I would like to contribute to this term under the following title 'Triangular Spaces in Organisations'.

### ***Triangular Spaces in Organisations***

I will pick up the thread where I first mentioned the theme of organisational triangulation: Bauriedl's thoughts on 'keeping the angle'. This formulation however only includes two lines of the triangle meeting at a corner and does not yet form a closed triangle. The triangle can only be closed once a third line is drawn. This is the line of relationship which binds the two actors together between whom the supervisor is holding angle. Ronald Britton (1989) has described in depth and in detail the step needed for 'the closure of the triangle' taking the example of the oedipal triangle with its complex prerequisites and consequences. Inspired by this I want to explore which insights we can get from Britton's concept of triangular space for the triangular constellations in organisations.

For the actors involved in closing the triad, this step is tied to a fundamental act of acknowledgement: the recognition of the fact that not only I entertain a relationship with the two actors but that they also have a relationship with each other. The recognition of a tie between two others is a difficult requirement for an actor who from where he is positioned sees two lines of relationships coming towards him. Not only does the acknowledgement of the link between the two other actors demand the recognition that there exists another relationship in the triangle but also that this is a relationship he is excluded from. This exclusion is fundamentally different from the position of exclusion in the case of a coalition formation. When a coalition between two actors is formed, the third one is completely excluded from their relationship. In contrast to this, a complete triad means that whilst every actor has a relationship to the other two, there is in addition to this, a relationship between the other two from which he is excluded. The completed triangular structure means that the other two actors are facing me at the same time as they are separated from me: they entertain a relationship with me as well as they turn away from me and face each other. The fully unfolded triad with its highly demanding structure of 'separation *and* attachment' replaces the structure typically found in coalitions: 'separation *or* attachment' (Ermann 1995, p. 203). Ermann (1995 p. 201) considers this relationship structure in which one sees self in relationship to others who in turn have a relationship to each other, a structure paradigmatically symbolised by the triangle and which is 'the basic form in which the group and society experience'. This is also where psychoanalysis meets sociology.<sup>6</sup> In the fully

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<sup>6</sup> In his book "Sociology" published in 1908 Georg Simmel had already developed the fundamentals of a sociological theory of triangular relations (see Simmel 1992).

developed triangle one not only has to keep the angle with the other two actors and balance this relationship in oneself, but in addition one has to deal with the relationship from which one is excluded and from which one will remain structurally excluded. As I have already described, negotiation processes in organisations are characterised by organisational units, levels in the hierarchy, professions etc. (i.e. subcultures) that are multiply joined to each other, cooperate and compete with each other. And yet every subculture in an organisation has to uphold relationships (structurally, functionally, hierarchically etc.) with the neighbouring subcultures, and take into account that these in turn have relationships with each other from which they are excluded. I will return to this point once I have given further explanations of the figure of the triad.

Not only is a third relationship added in the closure of the triad but as a result of this a new *form* of relationship arises: one's relationship *to a relationship*. In fact the relationship of exclusion in the coalition example is already a relationship to a relationship: the relationship the excluded third has to the relationship of coalition. It is a totally different type of relation if one's relationship to the relationship of the two others is happening in a constellation in which one has also a relationship to the one and the other in the triangle.

Britton (1989, p.87) calls this position of having a relationship to a relationship (and herewith the transition from the egocentric to an 'excentric perspective') the relationship of observation or of witness. From this 'third position' one can observe the relationship of the other two as well as one can imagine being observed whilst interacting with the one or the other by the actor who has in turn taken the position of the observer. Britton suggests that within this triangular constellation we can learn to 'see ourselves in interaction with others and to entertain another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves' (ibid.). The capacity to take on a third position, the excentric perspective within a triangle conveys the important capacity of internalising a foreign perspective, of standing within a system of reflective self-referral and herewith to a self-reflective action. A certain decentration of one's own perspective is related to this. When capable of partially taking on the perspective of others and to identify with it, as well as being able to see oneself from their perspective, one realises the limitations of one's own sub-cultural identity and loses an unquestioned point of view and safe organisational rootage (see Wellendorf 1996, p. 86).

It is now clear that the triangular space is not only a space between the actors and subcultures involved in the triad, but also that acknowledgement and recognition have to be achieved within every group. Triangular space only exists to the extent in which the actors of the triangle have developed *within themselves* triangular space. Triangulation includes:

- The real presence of three entities (be they three persons, three groups, three subcultures or even three organisations) which stand in a triadic relation to each other;
- The socio-emotional quality of the relationship within this triangular constellation;
- The inner representations of these relationships.

Triangulation can now be described as a process which leads from concrete relationships to internalised images through which triangulation – this being the intrinsic definition of triangulation – becomes an 'internalised structure' (Metzger 2000, p. 169).

The development of triangular inner space in subcultures of organisations also requires the members of every group to perceive and accept their structural place in the organisation and to accept the place of the other actors (with their specific duties, interests, and perspectives). This means that they have to recognise and realise their place in the order of the organisation

which principally is already structured triadically.<sup>7</sup> This process of triangulation (and the process of realising an already given triadic structure) succeeds socio-emotionally only if the subcultures are at least partially ready to consider and analyse their specific position of exclusion and to cope with and to contain the aspects of loss and renunciation that accompany the process of triangulation. I will describe this using the example of the triadic situation of team supervision: the relationship between management, team and supervisor.

- In the counselling relationship between team and supervisor the managers find themselves in the position of the excluded third. Although it is often management that makes the contract with the supervisor and negotiates the terms of condition, unless they regularly take part in the supervision (which was not the case in this example) they are not really involved in the supervision process itself. Whilst the team enters the institutional clarifying process and discusses the fulfilment of duties, the quality of their work, their relationships within the team and with clients etc., with the help of the supervisor, he (more or less explicitly) can slip, and be pushed into the role of a superior. Here he partially puts the exclusive leading and superior position of management in question. The supervisor therefore offers himself for some time as a sort of well-meaning leader with whom the team can talk more openly and less defensively, without fearing institutional or personal consequences. The management level has to cope with the idea that it is highly likely (as most experience shows) that there will be talk of them in the supervision and that as the management in this example said, the team will 'talk badly of them'. One of the managers told me: 'We're not paying the supervision for this!' How will the supervisor deal with this? The managers' concern is whether the supervisor will form a coalition with the team, supporting it in its tendencies against them, hence worsening the confrontation. Or instead, in accordance with their wishes persuade the team to devote itself to the super-ordinate goals of the organisation. The management has to deal with these insecurities and trust that the supervisor and the team are tackling that which is in the interest of the work tasks, the organisation, the cooperation with other teams and the management.
- In the relationship between the supervisor and management the team is the excluded third. It must come to terms with the fact that the supervisor not only works with them but also with their superiors discussing the situation within the organisation and the ways in which the supervision can be meaningful for the organisation as well as the team. Even if the supervisor's contact with the management is sporadic, the team must realise that its relationship with the supervisor is not as exclusive as it thought, wished and imagined. Triangular relationships go hand in hand with sharing the other with a third, with accepting the other's right to his relationships and with mourning the loss of exclusivity (or the wish thereof). As already mentioned, a realm of fantasies is triggered: what information does the supervisor have about the team? What secret tasks was he given? What information about the team does he pass on to the management? What does he know about developments in the organisation that he does not tell the team? How loyally does he treat the openness of the team (a prerequisite for the supervision process)? It was clear to the team portrayed in the vignette that the management could only have spoken badly

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<sup>7</sup> Here the problem of the relation between action and structure is brought up in the subject matter of triangulation. While the emphasis of this text lies in the triangulation, therefore on the process of the development of interactions structured triangularly (or as I prefer saying: 'triangular spaces') one has to assume at the same time that the structural dimensions of organisations, like social relations generally (Freund, 1976) are already triadic. But even though social relations are structured triadically this does not mean that social actions are triangular. Triangulation can be seen as a process in which the actors simultaneously bring forth, realise and produce the given triadic structure of the social world. This is a paradox similar to the one Winnicott (1971) formulated for the transitional object.

of them. In order to counterbalance this, after my meeting with their superiors, they began to degrade, personally devalue and even tell slanderous stories about them. Without meaning to use the family as an example of dynamics in the organisation too literally, one can ask oneself whether the exclusion of the team from the relationship between supervisor and management did not perhaps activate oedipal fantasies in them. To a certain extent the supervisor and the management take on the role of parental figures. In the example of my case study one can ask whether the combination of a strict fatherly management and a rather motherly and understanding supervisor activates the representations of the unified parental couple. This was reflected in my experience of the talks with the management. I never had the feeling that members of two social systems (management and supervision) were having a professional exchange about a further social system (the team). It felt more like I had to enter a discourse between two 'parents' about the rebellious and naughty children in the team (a discourse which proved difficult for me to free myself from).

When it comes to the fulfilment of assignments and the type of relationship they have to their clients, the team also faces a partial de-centering. They usually know how to keep the management out of their working methods and ways of dealing with clients, but in order to establish a working relationship in the supervision it is precisely on this point that they have to allow the supervisor to take a look at their cards and must allow clarifications of questions and problems with a third who brings his own viewpoints into the team.

- In the institutional and hierarchical relationship between management and team it is finally the supervisor who takes on the position of the excluded third. He is confronted with the fact that he is not a member of the organisation but that he comes from the outside and that the team and the management can evict him as soon as they are unsatisfied with his work. His wishes and fantasies of being the better boss for the team are brutally confronted with the fact of power in the organisation. Not only does he lack power and is excluded from the real interactions in the organisation, but he can only have little immediate influence on the every day organisation of work and relationships within the organisation. He can talk to the one or the other (and in some sessions to both) about conflictual themes, but he remains excluded from the essential questions considering the way in which members of the various (sub-) cultures really meet and arrange their boundaries on an everyday basis. According to my experience, supervision in triadic circumstances of organisations often consists in supporting the 'digestion' and 'integration' of all the things that have happened since the last supervision. The exclusion of the supervisor from the real communication between management and team is a test for the supervisor's tolerance for his own megalomania and wishes to influence his environment.

I would like to at least mention the point that the supervisor also faces the problem of the 'hidden' in the relationship from which he is excluded. He feels that there are things that play a role in the organisation of aspects of work and in the relationship between the managers and the team which he knows nothing of and which he cannot decipher. He here faces an alliance upheld by unconscious psycho-social defence mechanisms against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth 1988).

It should now be clear that for triangular spaces in organisations to develop, it is very important to consider how the condition of exclusion and of renunciation is produced and mastered. In other words, whether the isolated position of the excluded third can be partly transformed into the integrated position of a consolidated third.

The question in organisations becomes: What will the relationship to the other actors be like, what will the relationship of the other actors to each other be like and how will one's own exclusion from this relationship be perceived and experienced? In other words, which fantasies and ideas accompany the triangular configuration, how is it represented in the inner space of the various subcultures? According to Britton (1989, p.85), if there is no tolerance for the situation of exclusion tied to the position of the third and for the feelings of renunciation and of loss connected to the triad, it is likely that the third will develop feelings of envy, jealousy, distrust and persecution. When paraphrased, this can be formulated in the following way: 'what are those two planning (against me)?' On the other hand, if there is a tolerance for the feelings of loss and renunciation bound to the triad, the triad can stabilise itself and unfold its potential.<sup>8</sup> Hanna Segal (1991, p. 59) expands Britton's point and formulates the idea that the relationship between the other two can be looked at not only suspiciously but also rather 'objectively' (I would say: perceiving the two others and their tasks, interests and perspectives as well as the resulting cooperation of both as having a place in the organisation) or even benevolently. Once the others' relationship is no longer seen only as threatening or even as annihilating, but also as good, appropriate and even productive, this has a stabilising effect on the proceedings in the triangle and the individual actors. Here arises, as Julian Freund (1976) suggests, the chance for the transformation of the excluded third into a 'consolidated third'.

### ***The social skin of the triad***

How are the two themes of this essay connected? On the one hand the longing for a social skin seems essentially regressive and undifferentiated, whereas the other end of the spectrum of the triad is about mature and differentiated efforts of acknowledgement. But, on the other hand as I would like to show, the social skin and the triad do not have to be separate but they can enter a productive union, which figuratively, is capable of controlling paranoid-schizoid splitting tendencies from 'above' (top-down) and from 'below' (bottom-up).

The closing of the triangle does not only allow a relationship structured on the basis of acknowledgement between the three actors, the triangulation also provides the actors with a 'representation of the entire triad' (Buchholz 1990, p. 127). The triad then constitutes itself as an 'enclosed entity' (Simmel 1992) which is narcissistically invested by the actors (see Federn 1978, p. 321) therefore taking on the function of a social skin. The paranoid-schizoid mode of generating experience always threatens the hold and cohesion of the triad with splitting or, formulated in less pathological terms, it causes within the triad recurrent processes of opening, the dissolution of cohesions and hence the experience of difference and discontinuity. The depressive mode of generating experience articulates itself in the mature capacities of acknowledgement, in the 'maintenance, endurance and fertilization of differences' (Krejci 1999a, p. 31), articulated in processes of integration and containment. The autistic contiguous mode of generating experience produces a tendency for contact, contiguity and linkage, the feeling of security, of being held together, of a fundamental affiliation that can be condensed in the notion of 'social skin'. When a kind of social skin envelopes the triangular space the dissociative tendencies of the paranoid-schizoid mode of experience as well as the micro-political aspects of power and interests threatening the triad

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<sup>8</sup> Hinshelwood (1991) points to the capacity required by the triangle to step aside and observe a relationship between two objects assumes that one can stand the feeling of being excluded, therefore to cope with the classic oedipal pain. This links the triangulation to the depressive mode of generating experience. Hinshelwood suggests that this moment when the capacity to love and hate and the capacity to observe and to know link, is one of the essential characteristics of the depressive position. Triangular space and depressive mode are mutually dependent.

with social splitting are not only controlled from above through the reflective and integrating capacities of the depressive mode, but also from 'below' through the holding together of the autistic-contiguous mode. Conversely only a developed triangularity is a guarantee that the social skin that envelops all groups or cultures, can attain the double function of an intact and functioning skin. It serves the function of a boundary toward the outside, a holding together in the inside, as well as being open enough for the necessary exchange with the environment (in this case the organisation) and not to lead to a regressive closure.

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